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Not Separate but Not Equal: Improving Equity in Discipline in Racially and Ethnically Diverse School Settings

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Abstract

Educational inequities leading to deleterious outcomes and related to discipline continue within racially and ethnically diverse schools for myriad of reasons. Districts and schools require deliberate planning and systems change prioritized by educational administrators to address both interpersonal and structural racism and biases. This article outlines a blueprint that leverages the positive behavioral interventions and supports framework in completion of the following: (a) code of conduct revisions; (b) data analysis; (c) cultural and implicit bias awareness; and (d) culturally responsive hiring, training, and teaching.

Keywords: *Equity, disproportionate discipline, positive behavioral interventions and supports*

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A review of recent news coverage regarding the problem of school segregation reveals that racial segregation in schools has re-emerged as a major social problem in the last few decades. Unfortunately, while extensive efforts have been focused on diversifying whole school populations and associated outcomes, it is often the case that within racially and ethnically diverse schools, classrooms are highly segregated (Lewis & Diamond, 2015). Additionally, racial and ethnic minoritized students within such schools may have differing experiences associated with connectedness and safety compared to their White peers (Voight et al., 2015). Consequentially, minoritized students continue to face significant barriers to accessing educational opportunities, and the academic opportunity gap persists (Hansen et al., 2018).

The Civil Rights Data Collection of 2013–2014 reveals two striking examples of present-day educational inequities (Office of Civil Rights, 2016). First, results indicate that Black students are almost four times more likely to be suspended compared to their White peers. Second, Black and Latinx students are underrepresented in Advanced Placement (AP) courses, comprising 38% of students attending schools with AP classes, but only making up just 29% of those enrolled. The overrepresentation of minoritized students in exclusionary discipline practices (e.g., suspension, alternative school placement) and underrepresentation in academically rigorous courses highlight two important manifestations of institutionalized racism in our educational systems: interpersonal racism and structural racism (Bailey et al., 2017; Jones, 2000).

The purpose of this article is to highlight inequitable discipline practices that may lead to disproportionality for Black/African American students in special education needs under the

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emotional disturbance disability category and relatedly, disproportionality of inequitable exclusionary practices such as suspension for Black/African American students. Below, these issues are contextualized as grounded in both interpersonal and structural racism. Next, we describe evidence-informed strategies that can disrupt both interpersonal and structural forms of racism that are causing discipline-related inequities.

The issues of overrepresentation of Black/African American students in exclusionary discipline practices and special education under the category of emotional disturbance (hereafter referred to as emotional and behavioral disorders; EBD) are inextricably linked given that EBD is a judgmental disability category in which identification is determined by educators who deem the student to fit criteria rather than by a medical physician (Klingner et al., 2005). Further, while federal legislation has been aimed at reducing the overrepresentation of Black/African American students across special education (U.S. Department of Education, 2014), identification of EBD continues to focus on student deficits rather than strengths and contextual factors, which may inadvertently lead to unnecessary and avoidable segregation from general education, stigma, and inadequate instruction, particularly for Black/African American students (McKenna, 2013). More than 15 years ago, Klingner and colleagues (2005) called for culturally responsive systems in education that address policies, practices, and people, which is congruent with the below described interpersonally and structurally racist domains.

Interpersonal and Structural Racism in Education

Disproportionate discipline practices could be caused by structurally racist policies, including poorly written and utilized statutes and policies, poor training and hiring practices, problems with data collection and analysis, and/or interpersonal racism and implicit biases because carrying out such actions involves direct social interactions that are often motivated by

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explicit or implicit biases against minoritized students (Brondolo et al., 2012). Additionally, disproportionate discipline may be a result of structural racism given that the dominant culture (i.e., White, middle class) sets and reinforces the expectations of student behavior and may not reflect the diversity of the student population whom they serve (Fenning, & Rose, 2007). Simson (2013) suggests that such conditions exist as a product of the historical and present individual decisions, actions, and beliefs driven by anti-Black bias (implicit and explicit) and racism. Others (Merolla & Jackson, 2019; Thomas et al., 2009) have asserted that the cumulative impact of interpersonal and structural racism at the systems level has served to perpetuate a system of inequity at the expense of optimal educational attainment among minoritized students.

Interpersonal Racism and Bias and Discipline

Interpersonal racism and bias are driven by individuals' unconscious and explicit biases that manifest within direct social interactions. Emerging research has suggested that implicit and explicit racial bias among adults working with children is pervasive (Priest et al., 2018; Starck et al., 2020). While it can be argued that most teachers are not overt racists, the term is not mutually exclusive with cultural hegemony, which is the expectation that all students should behave in accordance with the rules, values, and norms set forth by the dominant culture (Gay, 2000).

In her seminal work, more than 20 years ago, Gay (2000) explained that when minoritized students fail to comply or align with such values, norms, and rules, they are perceived as unlovable, problematic, and difficult to embrace. It is important to note that while this seminal work was published decades ago, most of her conclusions and body of work published since 2000 relates to our current educational system. According to La Salle et al (2020) the educational system continues to be predicated on antiquated ideas of normal and

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typical at the expense of minoritized students, a group that makes up more than 50% of the public-school population (Klingner et al., 2005).

The current educational system must embrace the value of minoritized students instead of forcing assimilation. Our educational system must also engage in practices that embrace difference as a positive, not a deficit, and intentionally and actively adopt and enact anti-racist policies and teaching from the district level down (Klingner et al., 2005). To that end, “culturally responsive teaching should first confront existing instructional presumptions and practices before it proceeds with the more regenerative aspects of reform” (Gay, 2000, p. 46).

Although the call to action was first described by Gay two decades ago, the work of promoting and implementing culturally responsive teaching remains relevant to this day (Hollie, 2011; Levenson et al., 2019; Sugai et al., 2012). For example, a field guide integrating cultural responsiveness within PBIS was published in 2019 (Levenson et al., 2019). This document provides guidance via a 5-step plan in creating and implementing positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS) systems that are culturally responsive. Sugai and colleagues (Fallon et al., 2012; Sugai et al., 2012) discuss the significance of understanding the cultural factors that may be considered when promoting academic and social outcomes for students given that students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds are more likely to have poor outcomes related to academic achievement, special education, school discipline, school climate, and juvenile justice. Sugai et al. highlighted the need to adopt a contextual perspective on culture based on behavioral theory and analysis to support greater alignment among minoritized students and their school surroundings (Fallon et al., 2012; Sugai et al., 2012).

White, middle-class, mainstream teachers are not solely to blame for the inequality in education and thus solely responsible for correcting it (Hyland, 2005), we would be remiss to not

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acknowledge that, contextually, educational systems based on dominant White, mainstream middle-class norms have historically and dramatically contributed to the exacerbation and reproduction of racial inequality by not yet adopting policies and professional learning that actively undo existing structures and systems (Klingner et al., 2005). In one study that evaluated the presence of racial stereotypes in over 1,000 adults who work with children, Priest et al. (2018) found that Black and Latinx children were more likely to be viewed as lazy, violent, or unintelligent, compared to their White peers. Consequentially, Levy et al. (2016) have also found that exposure to interpersonal racism is an important risk factor for depression, anxiety, poor self-esteem, aggression, substance abuse, and school failure (Pachter & Coll, 2009).

One manifestation of racial bias on the part of adults working with children is disproportionate discipline (Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2015). An extensive body of research indicates that minoritized students are more likely to receive disciplinary consequences for nonviolent, disruptive, and subjective behaviors (i.e., defiance and disrespect) than their White peers (McIntosh et al., 2018; Smolkowski et al., 2016). According to McIntosh et al. (2014), there is no published research demonstrating that minoritized students, and Black/African American students in particular, actually display higher base rates of problematic behaviors.

A recent study examining how prospective teachers viewed Black students found that teachers were more likely to perceive the facial expressions of Black girls and boys as angry, even when they were not (Halberstadt et al., 2020). The authors refer to such actions as the result of racialized anger bias, circumstances in which people see anger where none exists (Halberstadt, 2020). The teacher sample in the study approximated the overall composition of public school teachers, with 89% women and 70% White. As result of such bias, minoritized students experience increased rates of disciplinary infractions, academic underachievement, grade

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retention, dropout, and contact with the juvenile justice system persist (Noltemeyer et al., 2015; Nicholson-Crotty et al., 2009).

Structural Racism and Discipline

At the same time, Williams et al. (2019) assert that structural racism in education is rooted in the founding history of the United States. Bailey et al. (2017) suggest that across the genesis of this country, the development of every system and facet of our economy was dependent on the separation and subjugation of minoritized people through slavery and segregation. While many overt forms of racism have become less prominent over time (e.g., separate drinking fountains, segregated seating on buses), structural racism still persists even in the absence of specific intentions. For example, residential segregation (the physical separation of groups into different neighborhoods) continues in spite of the revocation of explicit policies that made the division of White and Black neighborhoods a requirement (Jargowsky, 2018). Furthermore, White et al., (2012) assert that residential segregation plays a major role in the maintenance of economic, educational, and health disparities.

School discipline policies such as zero tolerance policies and those that lead to harmful exclusionary practices (e.g., suspension, alternative school placement, physical restraint) are an important example of structural racism that could be addressed by intentional systems and policy changes. To highlight this point, the Southern Poverty Law Center (2008) indicated that enactment of harmful zero tolerance policies in the early 2000s, still existing in some district policies, led to more than doubling suspension rates by 2006. Though these policies may not be implemented with the specific intention of causing harm to minoritized youth, Fenning and Rose (2007) note that they do interact with individually held conscious or unconscious biases and culturally bound behavioral norms resulting in discipline disproportionality on a systemic level.

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Zero tolerance policies in schools emerged based on the intention of improving safety, particularly with respect to gun violence (Curran, 2016). However, Martinez (2009) noted that these policies evolved to encompass a broad disciplinary philosophy where behavioral problems explicitly unrelated to safety would receive a similarly exclusionary response. Coupled with the tendency to view Black children as disruptive and aggressive in the absence of objective evidence, Halberstadt et al. (2020) stated that zero tolerance policies have led to more harmful than good outcomes. As is the case with other forms of structural racism, the disparate impact of discipline practices centered on exclusion will continue even if they are not explicitly supported or endorsed by individuals. These patterns can only be counteracted by efforts that are actively directed toward dismantling the mechanisms that maintain such inequities and systematically replacing them with equitable, proactive, supportive behavior management strategies. Kendi (2019) notes:

We are surrounded by racial inequality, as visible as the law, as hidden as our private thoughts. The question for each of us is: what side of history will we stand on? A racist is someone who is supporting a racist policy by their actions or inaction or expressing a racist idea. An antiracist is someone who is supporting an antiracist policy by their actions or expressing an antiracist idea. Racist and Antiracist are like removable name tags that are placed and replaced based on what someone is doing or not doing, supporting or expressing in each moment. These are not permanent tattoos. No one becomes a racist or antiracist. We can only strive to be one or the other. We can unknowingly strive to be racist. We can knowingly strive to be antiracist. Like fighting an addiction, being an antiracist requires persistent self-awareness, constant self-criticism, and regular self-examination (p. 22)

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Improving Equity with Structural and Interpersonal Strategies and Solutions

When considering the means by which inequity in discipline can be reduced to create more equitable outcomes for students, the examination of current policies, professional development opportunities for teachers, and the presence of racially, culturally, and contextually relevant strategies should be considered. We assert that the disparities between minoritized students and their White counterparts are well-noted in the literature, but just knowing that the problem exists is not enough. We are all responsible for moving beyond acknowledgment to a state of action with the goal of reforming a system that has not, in fact, been equal for all students. And while addressing these issues takes strategic planning across many individuals and levels within the educational system, Boneshefski and Runge (2014) assert that steps must first be taken at the school level.

In the remainder of this article, we provide educational administrators with a rationale for conducting this difficult work and a blueprint that outlines strategies to address interpersonal and structural inequities in school discipline. A brief description of strategies discussed throughout the paper and an action planning framework is provided in Table 1. Figure 1 provides the reader with an example action planning form. This form is intended to be used with a district or school equity team. The team should first identify one data-based problem related to equity or disproportionality they commit to work on. Next, the team should enter the baseline data pointing to that problem. Finally, the team should identify potential solutions and complete the remaining columns while revisiting the form as a progress update throughout the school year.

Structural: Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports

Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) can be enhanced by considering the cultural context and educational histories of the students, personnel, and families with whom

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school personnel serve. PBIS is a three-tiered positive, proactive framework. This responsive and evidence-based structure for preventing and treating behavior problems has been in place in schools across the United States for more than 20 years (Dunlap et al., 2009; Sugai & Horner 2020). Implementation of the PBIS framework provides students with increasingly intensive levels of behavioral, social, and emotional supports and interventions with an emphasis on making data-based decisions.

Tiered prevention in schools take a comprehensive approach to improving school climate, discipline, attendance, and academic outcomes. At the universal Tier 1 level of PBIS, educators develop a set of three to five broad, positively stated schoolwide expectations. These expectations are then defined for each location in the building and agreed upon across educators and taught to students. The development of culturally responsive schoolwide expectations should be driven by stakeholder (e.g., student, caregiver, community member) feedback, with the local culture and community in the forefront rather than the backgrounds and cultures of the teachers themselves. We believe that these actions will shift the expectations in the building to more closely match and respond to student culture, particularly in racially and ethnically diverse schools. Similarly, PBIS requires a universal acknowledgement system. A culturally responsive, equitable acknowledgement system can be designed that identifies student strengths and provides equitable access to praise and recognition. That acknowledgement system can include reinforcement items or privileges that are driven by student choice.

Another core feature of PBIS that should be culturally responsive is the predetermined, agreed-upon, and explicitly taught policy of classroom-managed versus office-managed unwanted behavior. For example, educators should be consistently implementing positive, proactive, culturally responsive classroom management practices that address student behaviors

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that are identified as those to be handled in the classroom rather than sending a student to the office, excluding them from academic instruction.

The development of other core PBIS components across advanced tiers, such as data collection and analysis, Tier 2 intervention assignment, and social, emotional, and behavioral screening, can also be culturally responsive and include a variety of stakeholders during development. A recent brief outlined a 5-point intervention plan centered on PBIS implementation in reducing disproportionate discipline (McIntosh et al., 2018). The major suggestions were to: (1) utilize disaggregated data to analyze disproportionate discipline trends; (2) implement culturally responsive PBIS; (3) use evidence-based instructional practices for engaging instruction; (4) implement policies and practices that improve equity; and (5) utilize bias reduction strategies within PBIS to support a positive, equitable school climate. The remaining strategies for improving equity that we discuss are based on these primary components, grounded in PBIS implementation with fidelity.

Structural: Code of Conduct Revisions

Codes of conduct state expectations, rules, and consequences across behavior, attendance, dress code, technology use, and other related topics. While most districts revise their code of conduct annually as a requirement, significant revisions may be necessary to increase equity, objectivity, and consistency. In revising the code of conduct, the goal is to make it less subjective and easier to apply consistently, thus reducing the potential for poor or unequitable decision-making regarding student behavior. Subjectivity in a behavioral rule is a key target for conduct code revision because it represents a major source of racial disproportionality in discipline (Girvan et al., 2017). Changes of this nature allow for fewer opportunities for disproportionate disciplinary practices caused by inconsistently applied rules and consequences.

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Revisions must first ensure that the code of conduct is up to date, reflects consistent, explicit disciplinary procedures, includes graduated discipline procedures, and promotes restorative, consistent, and equitable supports (rather than punitive responses alone). Currently, many codes of conduct fail to objectively and measurably define student violations such as disobedience, defiance, disorderly conduct, and disrespect (Fenning & Rose, 2007). These subjective terms should be replaced or clarified with explicit definitions, examples, and non-examples.

Second, codes of conduct may not be structured to require graduated and matched discipline consequences. Including proactive and measured responses to student behaviors will encourage the use of them over punitive responses. Third, the code of conduct should be readily accessible, readable, and provided in the home languages of all students so that caregivers can read, understand, and discuss and explicitly teach the expectations with their students. They should not be written using legal terminology and professional language. Furthermore, hard copies and links to electronic copies interpreted in all home languages should be available. Furthermore, educators should explicitly teach students the code of conduct and review it regularly with caregivers.

Code of conduct revisions can result in meaningful gains for students. Steinberg and Lacoé (2018) demonstrated that changes to discipline codes in Philadelphia associated with the application of punitive disciplinary practices led to less out-of-school suspensions and improved attendance. A study of discipline reforms in Chicago found evidence that code of conduct revisions were associated with improvements in test scores and attendance (Hinze-Pifer & Sartain, 2018).

Structural: Discipline Data Review and Analysis

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One step towards promoting systems-level change is by evaluating discipline practices on an ongoing (e.g., monthly) basis. Schools are encouraged to take a critical look at their data and discipline practices, and at the differential and adverse impact that those practices have on minoritized students (Smolkowski et al., 2016). For example, examining discipline data for Black and White students in school may reveal that Black students are receiving discipline referrals at a higher rate than White students for the same behaviors. A deeper dive may reveal that Black students are also attending classes less frequently and reporting a lack of connectedness to school. Using data in such a way to make decisions about intervention supports and staff training is a critical component of school reform because it offers another mechanism for reducing the subjectivity of identifying problems and potential solutions.

Other examples of practices that have disproportionately affected minoritized students include loosely written codes of conduct that allow for ambiguity in what is defined as problem behaviors (e.g., disrespect, defiance, disorderly conduct), vague procedures regarding what is worthy of an office referral versus what behaviors should be addressed in the classroom (e.g., assigning major and minor labels to behavior differently), and zero-tolerance policies that lead to detrimental exclusion and no therapeutic or supportive instruction or support. The detrimental impact of such disproportionate discipline practices speaks to the importance and need for strategies that reduce ambiguity in decision making, counteract teacher bias, and support racial identity development and awareness of bias for minoritized students.

An important strategy to address disproportionality in school discipline is to inspect disaggregated data at the district, school, and classroom levels (Blake et al., 2016). The first step in this process is for schools and districts to analyze their discipline data (e.g., office discipline referrals, suspensions) for the past three school years to determine a baseline rate of

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disproportionality. Next, strategies to mitigate disproportionate practices based on disaggregated data should be put in place with continued, monthly inspection of discipline data.

Schools should address consistent discipline practices and what constitutes an office referral versus what is to be managed by the teacher in the classroom, using data analysis at the teacher level to determine if particular teachers need supplementary classroom management professional development. With these components in place, ongoing data inspection should include monthly data inspection of: (a) month-to-month trends; (b) comparison of the current month to the same months in previous school year; and (c) comparison of yearly totals by that month to previous years with specific analysis on rates of discipline by race and gender.

A number of state- and federal-level initiatives have underscored the importance of disaggregated data in the context of goal setting, public data sharing, and the identification of root causes of disparities (Gregory et al., 2017). In addition, a study by Scott and colleagues (2002) found that monthly feedback of disaggregated data in a Midwestern high school led to a continual decrease in referrals for racial/ethnic minority students over time.

Structural: Improving Teacher Representation and Retention

Data suggest that up to half of teachers in the United States leave their positions within the first five years (Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). Causes include voluntary and involuntary movement to a new school and leaving the profession altogether. Teacher retention is even more critical for teachers representing minority populations. The teaching force is predominately White (approximately 85%) and female (Brennan & Bliss, 1998) while proportions of ethnic and racial minority groups continue to grow (Howey & Zimpher, 1991). These two complicated issues emphasize the importance of recruiting and retaining minority teachers to create greater racial and ethnic congruence between students and their teachers (Brennan & Bliss, 1998).

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In a study out of Johns Hopkins University, researchers found that Black students who had a Black kindergarten teacher were 18 percent more likely than their counterparts to enroll in college (Gershenson et al., 2018). And those who had at least one Black teacher in K through Grade 3 were 10% more likely to be perceived by their Grade 4 teachers as hard workers and persistent (Gershenson et al., 2018). Most shocking are findings from a 2017 study published in *Education Weekly* that examined outcomes for low-income Black students. In cases where these students had just one Black teacher in elementary school, it decreased the risk of dropping out by 40% (Will, 2017). The data provided by Gershenson et al. (2018) clearly show that reducing the racial disparity between students and their teachers is critical to improving equity across educational domains so as to address aforementioned issues with interpersonal and structural racism in schools. One example of this is what Priest et al. (2018) describe as the ingrained negative stereotypes of White adults towards predominantly Black and other minority students, particularly 13- to 18-year-old students.

Although a long-term, complicated change, improving the recruitment and retention of minority groups of teachers is critical to improving the educational experiences of all students, particularly in regards to discipline, school climate, and the social, emotional, and behavioral well-being of all students. The previously mentioned Gershenson et al. (2018) study of the long-term impact of having a same-race teacher for minority groups of students indicated that Black students who were taught by at least one Black teacher in kindergarten through Grade 3 were more likely to graduate from high school and more likely to attend college than their same-school peers who did not have a Black teacher in the kindergarten through Grade 3 school years. These benefits extended to short-term outcomes, including standardized test scores, attendance,

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and grades for students who were taught by at least one same-race teacher in their elementary schooling years.

Novel approaches to diversify the teaching force should be initiated and potentially coordinated across the public school systems and teacher training university programs. Examples of these efforts include alternative certification programs for teacher candidates and improved local recruitment efforts across community and state colleges and universities (Brennan & Bliss, 1998). In fact, measured differences across teacher morale, participation in decision making, and shortages between White-majority and White-minority schools (Cheema et al., 2017) could be moderated by improving minority teacher representation, thus increasing the potential to retain minority teachers after investing in education and recruitment efforts. Finally, the importance of representation of minority teachers also extends to school and district leadership, particularly for integrated schools and school districts.

Interpersonal: Culturally Responsive Practices

Culturally responsive educational practices refer to the incorporation of culturally responsive teaching and student–teacher social interactions within a school environment (Abacioglu et al., 2019; Cholewa et al., 2014; Sleeter & Cornbleth, 2011). The application of a culturally responsive framework across academic and non-academic contexts is critical for the promotion of equity in school discipline (Bal, Afacan, & Cakir, 2018).. Culturally responsive teaching incorporates understanding of and content from varying cultures, races, ethnicities, religions, languages, and income groups (Gay, 2018).

Core culturally responsive teaching practices include (a) knowing students and caring about student culture; (b) communicating strategies that are culturally informed and promote learning; and (c) teaching culturally diverse and congruent content (Gay, 2018). These

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components require educators to build and sustain teacher–student relationships in order to know their students. Strong teacher–student relationships serve as the foundation for gaining an understanding of student characteristics that can be responded to through adapted culturally responsive instructional practices (Abacioglu et al., 2019). In some cases, it is effective for educators to also identify ways in which they differ from students across varying factors in order to identify areas that the teacher could expand their understanding of students.

As Kendi (2019) described in *How to Be an Anti-Racist*, being anti-racist is akin to fighting an addiction. That is, the author states that it requires persistent self-awareness, constant self-criticism, and ongoing self-examination. The cornerstone of culturally responsive teaching actually begins before the academic instruction begins. Gay (2018) and Siwatu et al. (2017) suggest that culturally responsive teaching is intentionally focused on building positive relationships with students, fostering a supportive classroom environment, understanding the link between cultural norms and student behaviors, effectively communicating with parents from diverse cultural backgrounds, and applying classroom rules in a consistent and equitable manner.

Bondy and colleagues (2007) noted that culturally responsive classroom management “makes it explicit that classroom management is grounded in teachers’ judgments about appropriate behavior and that these judgments are informed by cultural assumptions” (p. 328). Thus, in addition to having a strong emphasis on fostering positive and caring interactions and educational contexts for students of all cultural backgrounds, these approaches require a deep ongoing awareness and reflection of the interchange between teacher judgments and cultural norms as manifested by student behavior. Applying this framework, it is incumbent on school staff to avoid conceptualizing different behaviors as being inherently problematic and to instead create space for diverse behaviors that do not detract from the goal of building a positive and

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supportive educational community. When student behavior does detract from core school values, culturally responsive classroom management methods posit that the response should be focused on teaching alternative behaviors rather than conceptualizing the student as a child acting in defiance to authority (Bondy et al., 2007).

Several recent studies support the use of culturally responsive practices to improve equity in discipline. The Double Check Model (Bradshaw et al., 2018) incorporates elements of culturally responsive teaching and classroom management through professional development and coaching activities. Bradshaw et al. (2018) examined the impact of Double Check coaching support in a sample of 158 elementary and middle school teachers and found that teachers in the coaching condition had fewer office disciplinary referrals for Black students. Another example of the successful application of culturally responsive educational practices is GREET–STOP–PROMPT (Cook et al., 2018), which focuses on effective implementation of a core set of classroom management practices that are designed to target root causes of discipline disparities. Cook and colleagues (2018) found that across three elementary schools, implementation was associated with a two thirds reduction in office disciplinary referrals in Black male students.

Interpersonal: Implicit Bias Disrupting Strategies Professional Learning

A school focused on equity for all students will provide professional learning opportunities for all educators regarding implicit bias and circumstances where educators are more prone to make quick decisions based on bias, also known as vulnerable decision points (VDPs). Recognizing VDPs is an instrumental part of any process aimed at reducing bias in decision making when perceived problems occur (McIntosh et al., 2014). Professional learning focused on implicit bias awareness training alone is not a panacea. Training should include content to help all educators to identify and acknowledge their own implicit biases (as those are

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times when they are most likely to act on those biases), and focus on explicitly training educators to use preventative, neutralizing strategies during proactively identified VDPs. With this background knowledge, educators can make more informed, self-aware decisions during the school day. This may lead to more supportive responses towards students, stronger student–teacher relationships, and ultimately reduction of the use of harsh, disproportionate discipline practices in schools.

Embedded within this work is that concept that educational professionals and schools recognize that equity is essential and requires direct attention and resources on a continuous basis. As such, there is a need to include processes that communicate the relevance and significance of equity in school discipline. Discussions of racial history in the United States and the Civil Rights Movement are common elements of programs that promote racial equity. An example would be acknowledging Ladson-Billings' (1998) assertion that the lived experiences of minoritized individuals have historically been deemphasized within dominant educational discourse and yet are essential to our understanding of racism. Empirical work in this area is limited, but one experimental study in a nationally representative sample found that when people were exposed to information about the history of racism, they were more likely to acknowledge the existence of present-day racial inequality (Fang & White, 2020).

Interpersonal and Structural: Awareness of Culture

Another step towards action that can moderate both interpersonal and structural racism is increasing cultural awareness, more specifically, recognizing the impact of culture within the context of education. Culture reflects the values, beliefs, and behaviors shared by a group of people based on race, geography, social and economic factors, and experiences or other unifying denominators (e.g., disability, gender; La Salle et al., 2015). Cultural identities have an impact

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on how individuals perceive and interact with their environments. In order for schools to become safe havens for students to learn and build meaningful relationships, concerted efforts must be made toward reducing implicit biases (i.e., unconscious thoughts or behaviors that affect our understanding and actions towards others), because they often result in inequitable outcomes for students (McIntosh et al., 2014; Wang & Degol, 2016).

To that end, becoming more culturally responsive and reducing implicit bias does not come as a manualized intervention or magical bag of tricks. This work requires a commitment from the systems level that includes open discussion with stakeholders, ongoing data review, professional development, and evidence-based strategies to improve student–teacher relationships, reduce discipline disproportionality, and encourage equitable outcomes for minoritized students. A culturally responsive approach requires a shift from viewing culture as a deficit to viewing culture as a resource, wherein teachers respect, value, and integrate students interests, experiences, and values and include them in decision making.

Effective educator professional development requires consideration of the complex, ongoing needs of educators to support new instructional strategies and approaches. To highlight this complexity, the Interconnected Model of Professional Growth (Clarke & Hollingsworth, 2002) is a comprehensive framework for educator development, recognizing multiple ways of change across four domains within growth networks: (1) personal, including knowledge, beliefs, attitudes; (2) external, including sources of information or stimulus; (3) practice, including professional or instructional strategies; and (4) consequence, including outcomes or results. Given required supports across all four domains for any educator professional development content, implementation of single half- or full-day professional development workshops about

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culturally responsive practices is not sufficient to adequately facilitate the development of key competencies (Clarke & Hollingsworth, 2002).

Just as the current educational reality for minoritized students did not occur overnight, addressing the cause of such adversity across belief systems, new information, strategies, and monitoring of results will not be corrected with one professional learning experience. Instead, we assert that the greatest impact on inequitable practices will only be seen when inequity is treated as carefully planned, prioritized, ongoing work throughout each school year, for all educators to engage in.

Conclusion

Improving equity in school discipline practices takes multi-faceted, difficult, coordinated, and thoughtful efforts that are most successful when implemented consistently and continuously regenerated. Just as disproportionate discipline did not occur abruptly or by chance, addressing the issue will require a sustainable plan for addressing interpersonal racism and bias and structurally racist policies that must be carefully developed and enacted over time. Figure 1 provides the reader with an action planning form to institute planning and incremental change. It is important to note that the focus should be on student strengths, identifying and celebrating differences, and promoting success through equitable educational opportunities. We assert that having educational institutions and systems with a focus on positive, preventive, culturally responsive supports that recognize the strengths that each student brings to their own learning experiences is the best place to start efforts to improve equity in school discipline practices. Further, ensuring that those same institutions and systems recognize the detrimental impacts that harsh, exclusionary and disproportionate discipline practices have on student outcomes will ideally lead to the utilization of supports that value, embrace, and meet the needs of minoritized

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students within their learning environments. Table 2 provides a list of suggested readings addressing the issue of improving equity in schools.

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Table 1

Actions for Improving Racial Equity in Schools

Action type	Description	Relevant possible outcomes
Interpersonal		
Culturally aware response practices	Disciplinary and instructional practices that integrate cultural awareness into decision-making and curriculum	Decreased disproportionality, positive school climate
Implicit bias disrupting strategies professional learning	Building knowledge about racism, and using vulnerable decision-points and neutralizing strategies	Decreased disproportionality, positive school climate, awareness of racism
Building awareness of culture	Providing education about and emphasizing the importance of student, family, school, community culture	Awareness and appreciation of cultural diversity
Structural		
Discipline data review and analysis	Ongoing review of disaggregated discipline data	Decreased disproportionality

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Improving teacher
representation and retention

Ongoing efforts promote a diverse teacher workforce and
meet the ongoing workplace needs of teachers from
diverse backgrounds

Diversity in teacher
demographics, teacher
retention, positive staff climate

Positive behavioral
interventions and supports

A three-tiered positive and proactive framework that
creates an data-based structure for preventing and
treating behavior problems

Decreased disproportionality,
positive school climate,
implementation fidelity

Code of conduct revisions

Making discipline policies less subjective and easier to
apply consistently, reducing the potential for poor or
unequitable decision-making regarding student behavior

Objectivity of discipline polies

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Table 2

Suggested Readings for Improving Equity in School Settings

Title	Author(s) or Website
Books	
<u>The Guide for White Women Who Teach Black Boys</u>	Ali Michael, Eddie Moore, & Marguerite W. Penick-Parks
“Multiplication is for White People”: Raising Expectations for Other People’s Children	Lisa Delpit
What Is It About Me You Can’t Teach?	Eleanor Renee Rodriguez, James A. Bellanca, & Deborah Rosalea Esparza
For White Folks Who Teach in the Hood ... and the Rest of Y’all Too	Christopher Emdin
How to Be an Anti-Racist	Dr. Ibram Kendi
We Want to Do More Than Survive	Betina Love
Pushout: The Criminalization of Black Girls in Schools	Monique W. Morris
Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?	Beverly Daniel Tatum
So You Want to Talk About Race	Ijeoma Oluo
Promoting Racial Literacy in Schools	Howard C. Stevenson

Web resources

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- Effective Teaching Is Anti-Racist Teaching <https://www.brown.edu/sheridan/teaching-learning-resources/inclusive-teaching/effective-teaching-anti-racist-teaching>
- Anti-Racist Pedagogy Guide: Methods and challenges <https://libguides.usc.edu/c.php?g=744325&p=5908931>
- Working for Racial Justice as a White Teacher <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2020/10/teaching-how-be-anti-racist-white-educator/616870/>
- Building an Anti-Racist Classroom https://otis.libguides.com/tlc/anti_racist_classroom
- What Anti-racism Really Means for Educators <https://www.tolerance.org/magazine/what-antiracism-really-means-for-educators>
- Becoming an Anti-Racist Educator <https://dcal.dartmouth.edu/resources/teaching-learning-foundations/becoming-anti-racist-educator>
- Becoming an Anti-Racist Educator <https://wheatoncollege.edu/academics/special-projects-initiatives/center-for-collaborative-teaching-and-learning/anti-racist-educator/>

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Black Lives Matter Resources

<https://ceqp.uoregon.edu/black-lives-matter-resources/>

CEEDAR Center Learning Resources

<https://cedar.education.ufl.edu/cems/culturally-relevant-education/learning-resources/>
